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SUBJECT: TUNISIA MAY SUBORDINATE LONG-TERM RESOLUTION OF FULBRIGHT PROBLEMS TO A LARGER FRAMEWORK FOR EDUCATIONAL COOPERATION

Sensitive but unclassified. Please handle accordingly.

¶1. (SBU) Summary: In a November 20 meeting, the Public Affairs Officer (PAO) raised with Dr. Jelel Ezzine (the new Director of International Cooperation at the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE)) the problems with the operation of the Fulbright program in Tunisia. Ezzine suggested that the long-term solution to Fulbright issues lay in creating a larger framework for educational cooperation between the United States and Tunisia. While permission for four pre-doctoral Fulbrighters to continue their research in-country may be forthcoming, the Tunisians may subordinate the issue of resolving inconvenient deadlines for submitting doctoral research proposals to a larger discussion of educational goals. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) The Public Affairs Officer met on November 20 with Dr. Jelel Ezzine, the new Director of International Cooperation at the Ministry of Higher Education (who is, effectively, the Minister's chief-of-staff), and raised the problems we have had with the operation of the Fulbright program in Tunisia. The most pressing issue is the lack of approval for four doctoral fellows to begin their research in January. A second problem is the unrealistic deadlines routinely imposed by the Ministry on submitting Fulbright doctoral research proposals for approval by the doctoral commissions at Tunisian universities where the researchers will be affiliated.

¶3. (SBU) Dr. Ezzine said that he valued the exchange of scholars and saw educational exchange as an important part of the cooperation between our countries, but drew a distinction between what he felt were "serious" projects (science, technology, and engineering research done by post-doctoral fellows) that accorded with Tunisia's overall development plan on the one hand, and projects which were "peripheral" to it (i.e., doctoral dissertation topics in the humanities) on the other. The PAO pointed out that doctoral dissertation researchers in such areas as engineering were not likely to do research in Tunisia but would probably stay in the United States. Instead, he urged Ezzine to view doctoral dissertation researchers in the social sciences and humanities as people who would return to teach a new generation of American university students and would be more inclined to communicate a positive picture of his country and greater understanding of the issues in the Middle East. Ezzine seemed to be eager to move on from this argument and reiterated that he would like Fulbright issues to be considered within a larger higher educational "framework" between the two countries.

¶4. (SBU) Although Ezzine did not share our sense of urgency over resolving the chronic problem of deadlines for submitting research proposals, his general attitude seemed very positive toward the United States and the Obama

administration. He mentioned that he had studied in the United States for nine years and had a PhD in engineering from Georgia Tech. He praised President Obama's June 4 Cairo speech highly and indicated that the purpose of the meeting with the PAO was to see what concrete proposals we were willing to come up with to flesh out the offers the President had made to the Arab/Muslim world in the educational and science/technology fields. He remarked repeatedly that cooperation in higher education was sought-after but that it should serve both countries' priorities. Among possible subjects that he felt such a framework might include were: English-language teaching, energy and green technology, engineering, management and public administration, and pure scientific research.

¶5. (SBU) Comment: Our sense from the meeting is that there is reason to hope that approval for four graduate students to study at Tunisian institutions of higher learning, a precondition for them to continue their doctoral research in Tunisia, may be forthcoming soon. Ezzine accepted a list with the scholars, names and said he would look into the matter. The long-term problem of unrealistically early deadlines is not likely to be resolved soon. The Ambassador's appointment with the Minister of Higher Education, Lazhar Bououni, on November 25 may provide a better sense of how the MOHE wishes to proceed on the larger issue of educational cooperation. End comment.

GRAY